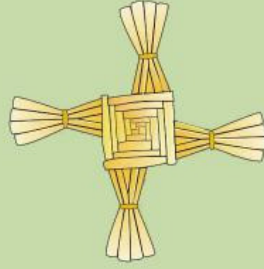


Saint Brigid



The Mary of Ireland

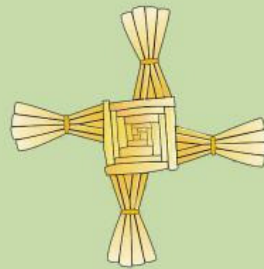


Saint Brigid

The Mary of Ireland

By

Alice Curtayne

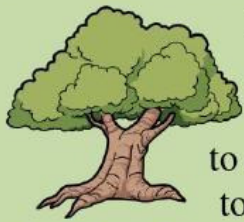


Cover Art: This media file is in the public domain in the United States. This applies to works where the copyright has expired, often because its first publication occurred prior to January 1, 1923

All other illustrations in this booklet are in the public domain in the United States.

Certainty of Records

CERTAINTY attaches to Irish record only from the coming of Saint Patrick. Before that, all is cloudy surmise. After Saint Patrick, the nation began to emerge in a clearer light. In that early clarity of record, three names were linked together—three names that will stand out for all time. No one can write Irish history without reference to those names. No account of native Irish literature can be presented if they are ignored, for the three



have been the abiding inspiration of the Irish people through the ages.

No account, even of native art, can be written without explaining them.

Archaeologists work backwards and arrive at them. Geographers have to consider them, for these three names are everywhere woven into the topography of the country. If, therefore, through some mystery of iniquity

the Church were silenced in Ireland and there were an end to native literature and art, still the very stones would cry out those names; wells, ruins, raths, and town lands would tell their story. Mountains would have to be leveled to blot out their memory. Most Irish history, literature, art, building, and topography are connected to them. The three are Patrick, Brigid, and Columcille. Their memory is a spiritual banner for the Irish people. When that flag is surrendered, the Gael is no more.

Saint Patrick, before he died, wrote his "*Confession*," a precious document, enshrined in the "*Book of Armagh*." It is brief, capable of being read attentively in half an hour; it is accessible to all in Dr. J. B. Newport White's translation, a rendering not only accurate, but also with the higher merit of reproducing something of the original's deep spirit. In this "*Confession*," Saint Patrick speaks chiefly of his missionary work in Ireland, and of the stupendous success that crowned his labors. He does not try to minimize his success—such not being the way of truth—but he humbly ascribes it directly to God. He tells us that what most astonished him among his converts were the rapid emergence of a strong native clergy and the firm rooting of monasticism in a miraculously congenial soil.

A native clergy and a native monastic impulse are indeed the two factors that give a sort of divine guarantee of permanence to the evangelization of any country. Patrick, son of a Roman decurion, trained through the long, slow years at the famous centers of Marmoutier, Lerins, Arles, and Auxerre, with rigid Roman-Empire notions of what was civilized and what was barbarian, confesses himself astonished at the aptness and the quick spiritual insight of his Irish converts. Yet, the most amazing unexpected blossom

that unfolded in the garden planted by Patrick was—Brigid. If the Apostle envisaged the rising up of even a Columcille in Ireland, I do not think he had dared dream of such a portent as Brigid.

Every one of her nine or ten first biographers assigns a different date to her birth, but no date is very far distant from the year 450. Therefore, one must be content with saying that she was born about the middle of the fifth century. The new chronology of Patrick's life, outcome of extensive research, places his death in the year 461. This makes it impossible for Saint Patrick to have known Brigid in her maturity. In fact, in the oldest "Lives" of the Apostles she is mentioned only once. She can have been little more than a child when he died.

If I begin by saying that Brigid was a flame, I risk the charge of taking a caption from the cinema, yet that is the term used by her first biographers in describing her. Her singularity must be emphasized. The idea of perpetuating her memory by keeping a fire constantly burning as a symbol of her was strictly appropriate. All who approached her in life testified that she communicated a sort of illumination and warmth. She stood out luminously against a background of gloom. Some authorities affirm that her name means "fiery arrow." She certainly shot up like a dart of fire out of utter darkness.

Considerations

To appreciate the unique and dramatic nature of such a portent as Brigid, one must see her in sharp contrast with the women of her day. I do not say that these women were not emancipated. The women of early Christian Ireland were far more emancipated than were women from other areas or even from later times. These women had special assemblies of their own to discuss matters of feminine interest, and no man was permitted to be present. They had games of their own at fairs. There is evidence that women of rank learned how to read and write. A woman aimed not merely at knowing all feminine crafts, but at possessing all the utensils necessary for them—to wit, a hand-mill, sieve, loom, distaff, and spindles. If she possessed all these, she had a special status, that of a "great worker," as it was quaintly termed. A prospective husband in those days had to pay a dowry to his bride's father. Thus, someone, I think it is O'Curry, remarks that Ireland was the only place where the wife rather than the husband was bought. After marriage, a wife was allowed separate



ownership of property, and her position was practically equal to that of her husband. In the early Christian Ireland that produced Brigid, there is no hint of injustice or subjection in the normal status of woman.

I say “the normal status,” for there was a second grade of women, “bond maidens” or slave women, who were much less fortunate. They had no rights. They were frequently grossly treated. Ancient Irish literature is full of anecdotes illustrating the miseries of their position. Saint Patrick pitied them sincerely. The fact that he makes special mention of them in his “*Confession*” shows that their plight was on his mind. He says,

“The women who are kept in slavery suffer especially; they constantly endure even unto terrors and threats. But the Lord gave grace to many of His handmaidens, for, although they are forbidden, they earnestly follow the example (set them).”

The state of affairs is very clear from this brief reference. When the slave woman of a pagan master became a convert, she had not much to hope for by way of sympathy or facilities to practice her religion, unless her masters, too, were converted. It was unheard of that a slave-woman should have ideas, or even a will of her own. The moment she was suspected of possessing such, her lot was “suffering, terrors, and threats.”

The miracle of Brigid is that she belonged to this despised and downtrodden class.

Two points must be remembered. First this: among free women there was no possible sphere of usefulness, no status, no avenue of honor thinkable outside of family life. The idea of leadership, of organization by women among women, was absolutely unknown. Secondly, neither within nor without the family was emancipation even dreamed by slave-women. Yet, Brigid rose from among them and straightway the whole framework of the feminine world was altered with its horizons enlarged. Upon those horizons dawned “*Vision*.” Brigid was not the first nun in Ireland, but among the first, and she was the very greatest. She was a captive, destined to hold captive for all time the imagination of her people. She opened to free women a gate into a new land, but to bondwomen she opened the very gates of Paradise. In one gesture, she taught them to mount a stairway of escape! She taught them they could pursue liberty, status, vocation, immunity from ill treatment, and the chance to pursue those things in a dedicated life.

As Dr. Healy pointed out, the full weight of evidence is in favor of the account stating that Saint Brigid was the daughter of a Leinster chieftain named Dubhthach—lineal descendant of a High King of Ireland—and of a bondwoman in his household. Brigid

was not born in her father's house, but at Faughart, a village some two miles from Dundalk, in the house of a Druid to whom her mother had been sold before the birth of the child.

Having royalty on one side and slavery on the other, Brigid grew up with an inborn comprehension of all classes of society. Frequently, in after-life, we find her claiming kinship with slaves, but while making almost a regal gesture. She had what is called a bad start, indeed a very bad start, in life. If there was any happiness in her childhood, no gleam of it has been transmitted in the "Lives." Probably no one today could find a childhood as unhappy as Brigid's. If Dubhthach had sold her mother, he had reserved for himself the offspring. Shortly after her birth, therefore, the child, who had been baptized a Christian, was taken back into her father's household to receive her own initiation into drudgery. She had there a stepmother who detested her, and who made her the object of persecution. From that sordid background, her individuality began to emerge uniquely, like a rare blossom. She perplexed her chieftain father because she had two undeniable gifts hardly ever found in combination: extreme beauty and the quickest intelligence. She could not be ignored. Yet, her gifts hardly recommended her to her stepmother. In the end, Dubhthach, to promote the peace of his household, decided to be rid of Brigid.

One of the charges brought against her at this period was her habit of giving away her father's property in "indiscriminate" charity. Her bounty was always of that sweeping and even devastating kind, disconcerting to those about her. Traits of royalty seem to have come out most inconveniently in the slave girl. She was incapable of refusing a beggar. When set to mind sheep, she would even hand one of them away—to a leper, perhaps. She might indicate even a cow as his portion. . . . Her exceptional strong-mindedness was evident at this early age as though she was doggedly determined to right some of the injustice of the world. In her case, we may be sure that "suffering, terrors, and threats" were employed freely to deter her from taking her Christianity with such literalness. No punishment had the least effect on her (after all, she was Dubhthach's daughter). Hence, the reason she was called away one day from her domestic drudgery and placed in a chariot by her father. He had made up his mind to sell her to the son of his overlord, the King of Leinster.

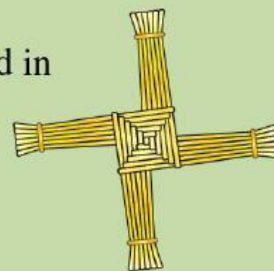
The story of what ensued is full of human interest. Brigid, being a wholly normal child, beamed with delight at the prospect of a drive. However, her father was in a towering rage, and said roughly to her, "It is not to give you a treat that I am taking you in the chariot, but to sell you. You are going to grind the corn for Dunlaing now." When they arrived at the latter's fortress, Dubhthach left her sitting in the chariot, while he went in to make a bargain. The unhappy man left his sword, too, in the chariot. A beggar seems to

have come on the scene immediately and Brigid serenely handed him her father's sword! I tell this to show how very incorrigible she was. . . . I leave to the reader's imagination the scene that followed her father's return.

Dunlaing, her prospective buyer, was a Christian, fortunately for Brigid. Of her bountiful giving, he took an altogether different view from her father. He also appears to have remonstrated with Dubhthach for trying to sell his own daughter. He gave him a new sword to placate him. The upshot was that Brigid was not sold, but taken home again. After this, she seems to have gradually slipped out of a condition of bondage.

The Dedicated Life

She started then from absolute nothingness, and all the help she received in her career came not from her family, but from such Christian bishops as she had the good fortune to encounter. Patrick had set the example of purchasing the manumission of slaves wherever possible to enable them to practice their religion and his disciples followed his example.



It was probably through some such assistance that Brigid became a nun while yet in her early teens—sixteen or seventeen. Names of two bishops stand out as her counselors: Maccaille, by whom she was professed, and Mel, who was her constant adviser.

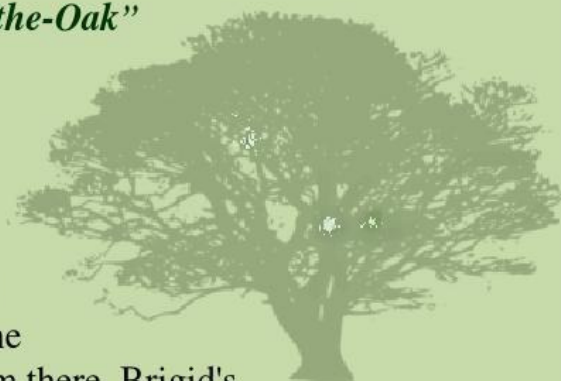
In those early days, it was the practice for nuns, or “consecrated virgins,” as they were called, to remain in their own home, or in small and usually unorganized groups. Brigid, in the beginning, did likewise. Then she ventured out to live with eight or nine companions. Thus, she became a pioneer of community life and the patroness of all the hosts of innumerable Irish nuns. The site where her first community made their convent settlement is unknown. We know, however, that Brigid's example was followed so rapidly and by such numbers that other foundations became imperative. She was forced to lead a life of constant travel to respond to the demand for new settlements. Of these, the greatest and most famous was at Kildare, where she chiefly had her residence, in her “Cell-of-the-Oak.”

As a nun, Brigid appears to have dressed in a white woolen habit and cloak, with a white veil, and her hair was not cut. She wrote a rule, which is no longer extant, but is said the rule enjoined a severe mode of life in which mortification entered largely. None of her nuns, however, led an enclosed life. Brigid, as we have said, was, of necessity, an indefatigable traveler, constantly driving in a chariot around the country. In these

journeys, it was her practice to take some of her sisters in religion to accompany her. Before her death, she was the Mother Abbess of thirteen thousand nuns.

Many times in her life, we find Brigid securing the freedom of slaves, always with an interest that amounted to passion. One of these was a woman whom she found her father treating badly; another was a girl who was being cruelly beaten by her mistress, who was still unwilling to part with the slave at any price because she was “a weaver of very fine stuffs.”

Around the little community, established at her “*Cell-of-the-Oak*” in Kildare, there soon grew a mighty institution, even a settlement as large as a city. Brigid founded a monastic house for men as well as for women and it was probably for that reason she was granted the favor of nominating a bishop for Kildare. These monks, who lived according to Brigid's rule, founded in their turn a school, which speedily rivaled the famous school of Armagh. The Kildare School specialized in artistic metalwork, and from there, Brigid's “family” originated one of the strongest impulses to Christian native art. Beautifully ornamented chalices, patens, book-covers, crosiers and bells were supplied from Kildare to all the churches in Ireland.



Illumination was another branch of art in which this school excelled. There existed at one time, now alas, no longer extant, a “*Book of Kildare*” which is said to have surpassed in beauty even the “*Book of Kells*.” Giraldus Cambrensis, who appears to have seen it in the twelfth century, praised it at great length as the most beautiful book he had ever seen.

Counsel

Brigid's exceptional powers of construction and administration naturally attracted the notice of contemporary ecclesiastics. All who were of note at that time appear to have sought her counsel in the organization of the areas under their jurisdiction. Her strong-mindedness, a quality rare in a woman at the time, has given rise to many legends. One of these represents her as having episcopal powers conferred upon her and another represents her conferring episcopal powers, both legends being manifestly absurd. That, from taking counsel of bishops, she developed into the counselor of bishops is certain; that she even had a voice in the appointing of bishops is probable.

Charity

Great stress is laid in the “Lives” on her material charity. The hugeness of her bounty was a perpetual embarrassment to her community, as a few examples will show. Once, when she and her companions were driving in a chariot on a long journey, they encountered a poor family, with heavy burdens, toiling along the road, apparently moving their entire household. The saint immediately alighted, bade her nuns do likewise, and handed their vehicle over to the pedestrians. Then, she and her sisters sat down by the roadside to consider their position, for their destination was too far away to reach it on foot. We read of her community frequently losing patience and railing at her. They are even represented as saying this: “Much good your compassion does us, when we are often without bread and clothing!” Who can blame them? The terrific example given by Brigid seemed too hard for mortals. Once it devolved upon her to entertain a bishop and his retinue. Her nuns assiduously collected provisions and prepared a feast which they considered fairly adequate for the occasion. However, almost on the eve of the event, a crowd of beggars came to the gates, importuning alms, and Brigid dispensed among them every item, down to the last crumb, of what had been prepared for the feast!



This must have been a great personal sacrifice, for if the saint had a recreation it was the exercise of hospitality. Everyone who came to her doors was entertained. In this lavish dispensing, she was frequently disturbed by misgivings of an insufficient supply. Would the butter last out? Would the beer go round? However, all earthy feasts come to an end. This great-souled woman always thought the backs of departing guests a sad sight. Did they have enough? Would they be fed tomorrow? There is an Irish poem ascribed to her in which she is supposed to envisage heaven as a stupendous feast, shared by countless guests and going on forever, replenished from inexhaustible supplies; even a “lake of ale” is mentioned. Though the authenticity of the poem is dubious, the idea is just. It is strictly true of Brigid that her heaven would be a state in which she could have all the pleasures of hospitality without its solitudes.

Saint of Pastoral Life

Her visions were as characteristic of her as that feasting notion of heaven. Professor Gardner, extending a thought of Shelley, has remarked somewhere that, “the mystic's representation, the language that he uses, must all be colored by his previous education and mental equipment.” It is, indeed, highly interesting to observe that when the saints attempt to describe their visions they invariably end by describing some daily scene, but to which they attach an allegorical meaning. Thus, when Saint Catherine of Siena,

pursued with questions about her ecstatic experience, attempted a stammering description, what emerged, in fact, was no more than a description of an early Sienese painting! How characteristic in this respect were the visions of Brigid. In the vision described in the *Labar Brecc*, she “saw” ploughmen and sowers, clear shining streams, oats springing up, a furrowed field, all farm animals: sheep, swine, and dogs. These are the things Brigid's eyes rested upon every day.



Thus, Saint Brigid is supremely the saint of pastoral life. She is the genius of Irish homesteads and every farm is, in a sense, her shrine. She is the tutelar spirit of Irish meadows and gardens. Yet, within the iron gates of industrial cities, she is a stranger. All her legends are about farm life—milking cows, making firkins of butter, calling home the sheep in the rain. She was at home in a dairy. The legends evoke discomfitures that are familiar: the dairymaid's confusion when a superior worker sneers at her butter as insufficient in quantity or indifferent in quality. Brigid was a notable butter and cheese maker, and her home-brewed ale was famous throughout the land. After her profession, even when she was Mother Abbess of thirteen thousand nuns, she still spent part of each day at those rural occupations. We read of her coming in from shepherding, her garments saturated with rain; or supervising the reapers from dawn to sunset in the harvest fields about her convent settlement; or contentedly busy over her stores of honey and wholesome brews.

She was familiar with and loved all animal life. The wild duck came at her call. Once she tamed a wild fox for a pet.

Patroness of Learning

Yet, one finds her represented in statues—I remember one notably, at Saint Gerans holding a book in one hand and a quill pen in the other. This is because she was the patroness of learning, too. I have said that the school founded by her inspiration at Kildare became one of the two most famous in Ireland. She fostered culture equally with pastoral occupations. Therefore, to describe her adequately, one must associate words commonly—and perhaps wrongly—dissociated. One must call her an intellectual dairymaid, a cultured cowherd, a field-laborer who promoted art and literature, or a learned shepherdess. In considering Brigid at her rural occupations, let that statement in the *“Book of Lismore”* be always remembered too. It stated,



“Wherefore thence it came to pass that the comradeship of the world's sons of reading is with Brigid, and the Lord gives them through Brigid's prayer every perfect good they ask.”

Unshakable Strength & Constant Kindness

An epigrammatic mode of speech and a certain imperiousness are attributed to her. Once a visitor brought her a basket of choice apples, which Brigid immediately began to distribute among lepers. “I did not bring them for those,” cried the visitor, chagrined, “but for you.” “What is mine is theirs,” answered Brigid. Once an Abbot and some companions came to her convent to preach. They had traveled a long distance and, on their arrival, told her they were hungry. “So are we hungry—for instruction,” said Brigid. “Go into the church first and preach and then you shall eat.” She was vehement by nature and her method in communication was to cut an argument short by swift and emphatic action. She practiced personal mortification to an extent that would be frightening to detail, yet never lost hold of practical common sense. See how these traits emerge from the following anecdotes.



Once in a period of bad harvests, a little settlement she had founded was without food and Brigid and two companions set out to procure some. They finally arrived in a starving condition at a neighboring monastic settlement. The Abbot set before them bread and bacon, which Brigid began thankfully to eat. However, it was Lent, and her two companions refrained from the bacon, as though to say, “We're going to keep the fast, even if you're not!” When Brigid noticed their attitude, she was so indignant at what was but Pharisaical formalism under circumstances of such stress, that she jumped up from the table, and, taking the sisters by the shoulders, ran them out of the room.

Leprosy, or some form of it, must have been common at the time in Ireland, for lepers throng the old “Lives.” Within “Lives,” they prowl around the convent in search of alms, live permanently on Brigid's bounty, obtain miraculous cures from her, or quarrel among themselves, for they were an obstreperous class, and appeared to think their affliction gave them the privilege of lawlessness. We see Brigid in her white woolen dress and white veil constantly laboring for their relief within a circle of them. Once she told a leper, who was but slightly afflicted, to wash another, who was a mass of scurvy. The leper curtly refused. Whereupon Brigid, without comment, dragged forward a tub of water and did it herself.

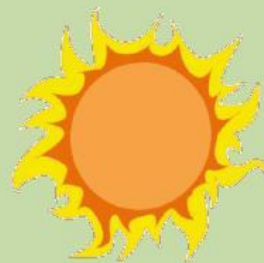
For all her fiery vehemence, she had an abiding gentleness, too, as is seen in the story of the blind nun, Dara. Once, during her round of visitations, Brigid came upon an old,

blind sister and sat beside her to talk. Like many who are similarly afflicted, Dara's mind was exceptionally bright and her conversation very good. Brigid forgot the passage of time while they talked in complete absorption. She realized it with a start when she saw through the open doorway dawn breaking over the fields, and found that the night had passed in discussion. The saint sat looking silently at the beauty of the sunrise, and the freshness of the world it revealed. Artist that she was, it profoundly affected her. Suddenly it seemed an intolerable thing that her companion could not see it too. Turning to Dara, she touched her eyes and the blind nun saw. Dara looked long at the daybreak without speaking. Then she said to Brigid, "Give me back my blindness, for if I were to behold this every day, my powers of contemplation would be scattered." Brigid touched her eyes again and left her enveloped in welcome darkness.

There is, in all the stories, legendary and authentic, concerning Brigid, a surprising ring of familiarity. The miraculous apart, those simple episodes of everyday occurrence sound as though they happened yesterday to some nun of our acquaintance. It is worthy to note that she held the affections not only of her own communities, but also of the laity too, who always enjoyed visiting her. We read of a girl coming to see her and the hours passing in a flash. The visitor was exceedingly sorrowful when she found it was time to go. "Stay here for the night," said Brigid. "But there is no one at home to milk the cows," said the girl, "no one to feed the calves or drive in the cattle unless I go." "Leave all that to me," said Brigid. So, the girl, persuaded, remained. Of course, when she got home the next day, her property was safe and all had been done for her by miracle.

The same occurred with another girl, whose heart seemed to break when the moment of departure came. "Stay here for the night," said Brigid. This girl had an elderly, paralyzed father waiting at home, and she insisted with anguish that she should return or his anxiety would be intolerable. "Leave all that to me," said Brigid. When the girl returned home in the forenoon of the following day, her father welcomed her with a tranquil smile. He said the sun had never ceased shining during her absence, which he believed to be but of an hour's duration.

I like that picture of the old man, dozing off in full sunshine, his eyes sealed at Brigid's prayer so he knew nothing of the torturing passage of lonely hours. When he opened them again, he saw the same full sunshine and his daughter coming towards him.



Physical Courage

Physical courage entered largely into Brigid's work of organizing convent settlements all over Ireland. She had to drive immense distances, often over rough roads and rivers with mettlesome horses. We read of her being twice thrown from her chariot. On one occasion, her head struck a stone resulting in a serious cut. Once, her horse bolted and stopped by miracle on the edge of a precipice. Once, to avail of a short cut, her charioteer insisted on driving her through a field that was private property and in the process of being hedged. There ensued a fight between him and some laborers, in which Brigid incurred considerable danger.

It was a time of lawlessness too. The protection of her little settlements was one of her primary concerns. We read, more than once, of robbers plundering the property of her communities. Brigid, in her abounding charity, was frequently victimized, even by the rich, although, in such event, she usually scored signally in the end.

She suffered always from an infirmity of the eyes, said to have originated in a blow dealt by her stepbrother when she was a child. She showed a distaste for consulting a physician to procure relief, but was persuaded to do so by Bishop Mel. It is curious to note that Brigid's mother appears to have suffered also from some affliction of the eyes.



Known by Many

Brigid was sought out by all the foremost figures in the ecclesiastical world of her day. Those meager first references of Brigid within the "Lives" are interspersed with great names. Two have already been mentioned: Maccaille and Mel. She travelled Munster with Bishop Erc, that "sweet-voiced" Brehon, who was the first to acclaim Patrick at the court of King Laoghaire, and who was Brendan's preceptor, teaching him even as he himself had been taught by Patrick. Bishop Erc, of whom it is written, "everything that he did was just." The famous Gildas the Wise sent Brigid a bell from his retreat in Brittany. Brendan, the Navigator, came to her when he returned from his first voyage, to lay his renown at her feet. Ailbe of Emily consulted her on his rule.

Legend in Life

One of the most beautiful legends about Brigid represents her hurrying out of the fields from a shower of rain, her garments soaked. It must have been an April day, for when she reached her cell the sun was shining again, and a sunbeam, strong and golden, shone

through her door. Brigid took off her wet cloak and hung it on the sunbeam to dry! It is thus I should like to see her represented by an artist. The legend is a convenient symbol. Brigid did something even more marvelous than causing the sun to stand still over the Valley of Jehosaphat. Before its radiance could be dimmed, she arrested the first sunburst of Christianity, causing its beams to shine strongly and forever. All the light of Ireland's conversion is bound up in her name.

She died somewhere near the year 523 in the convent settlement of her predilection, Kildare. She was then in her seventies. She received the Last Sacraments from Saint Ninnidh, who, on that account, has gone down into history as Ninnidh-of-the-Clean-Hand. The legend goes that Saint Brigid had prophesied to him he would assist her at the hour of her death, and he ever afterwards wore a gauntlet on his right hand so nothing should defile it before he had administered the last rites to her. It may be an extreme way of stating how the prophecy impressed Ninnidh, and of how carefully he bore himself in so as not to be too unworthy of the honor. Tradition has it that the remains of Saint Brigid were finally interred in the same grave with those other two who are the pride of the Irish race—Patrick and Columcille. The doubt, therefore, that attaches to the grave of Patrick surrounds, too, the burial-place of Brigid.

Legend in Death

The fame and popularity accruing to her in life became phenomenal at her death. The first Christian missionaries who left the shores of Ireland carried her name with them like a banner of conquest.

The "*Book of Lismore*," contains a hymn to her, but the authorship is dubious. Some notion of what Saint Brigid meant to her contemporaries and immediate followers can be gained from speculations about the authorship of the hymn. The scribe makes five guesses. He says,

“perhaps it was Saint Columcille wrote it, when he was caught in a storm at sea,
and prayed to Brigid for a calm;

perhaps it was Brocan Cloen;

perhaps it was three of her disciples who went to Rome, and prayed to her when
they found themselves in great danger there;

perhaps it was Saint Brendan, who heard her name honored by the very monsters
of the deep;

or perhaps it was Ultan.”

The strength of her order is testified by the ubiquity of her name in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Devon, France, and particularly Brittany. Her remarkable influence still speaks plainly in those dedications of churches too numerous to be counted.

There is a beautiful panegyric of Saint Brigid at the end of her “Life” in the *“Book of Lismore.”* In the translation by Whitley Stokes, its beauty has been preserved. Here is an abridgement of the passage:

“Everything that Brigid would ask of the Lord was granted to her at once. For this was her desire: to satisfy the poor, to expel every hardship, to spare every miserable man. None was ever more retiring, more modest, more gentle, more humble, more wise, or more harmonious than she. She was abstinent, innocent, prayerful, and patient; she was glad in God's commandments; she was firm, humble, forgiving, and loving; she was a consecrated casket for keeping Christ's Body and His Blood; she was a temple of God. Her heart and her mind were a throne of rest for the Holy Ghost. She was simple before God; she was compassionate towards the wretched; she was splendid in miracles and marvels; wherefore her name among created things is Dove among birds, Vine among trees, Sun among stars.

“She helps everyone who is in strait and danger; she banishes pestilence; she quells the anger and the storm of the sea. She is the prophetess of Christ, she is the Queen of the South; she is the Mary of the Gael.”

It is not known how early in our history that tribute to her was written. The *“Book of Lismore”* was copied in the latter half of the fifteenth century from a collection of ancient manuscripts that are now lost.

The Brigidine Order

During her own lifetime Saint Brigid, foundress of monasticism in Ireland, saw convents spread throughout the country, convents that continued to flourish down the centuries—even after the so-called Reformation. It took the clean-sweep of the Penal Days to deprive Ireland of practically all her religious institutes and Ireland, as we know, was an unhappy land without them.

Even before the Emancipation in 1829, however, God inspired some holy men with the idea of restoring, or trying to restore, the Religious Orders. Among these was the Right Reverend Daniel Delaney, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, whose residence, then, was in the town of Tullow, County Carlow. Here, he established the Confraternity of the

Blessed Sacrament—composed of the most exemplary of his people, whom he enrolled as teachers of Catechism and Christian Doctrine. From this Confraternity grew two religious institutes, which have rendered priceless service to the cause of Catholic education: the Sisters of Saint Brigid and the Brothers of Saint Patrick. The Bishop constituted himself the spiritual director of these religious, for whom he was already preparing a set of rules when the Rebellion of 1798 put an end, for the time being, to his plans. No sooner was peace restored, however, than the good work began again.

In 1807, on the Feast of Saint Brigid, the first Brigidine Convent was established at Tullow. The name of a pious lady, Miss Judith Browne, who was educated at the Benedictine Convent, Ypres, is bound up inseparably with the history of the earliest beginnings of the Brigidine Order. She came to Tullow to place herself under the spiritual direction of Dr. Delaney, and her coming was most opportune, for, with her experience and thorough knowledge of religious life and discipline, she was able to render invaluable assistance to the young community. The remainder of her days was spent in the peaceful retreat she had chosen, though she never became a member of the Community.

The Brigidine Nuns are, in point of fact, a very ancient order reborn, and their spirit is the spirit of their holy foundress, Saint Brigid. Though their work in a modern world has necessarily altered, they still devote themselves, first to their own sanctification and, next, to the education of Catholic youth. The acorn sown by Dr. Delaney has grown into a mammoth oak, whose branches have spread over two hemispheres.

From Mountrath, Ireland, the first members of the Order came to Australia and had their first foundation at Coonamble, N.S.W.

At the request of Dr. Crane, Bishop of Sandhurst, the first foundation was made from Tullow to Echuca in 1886. In the same year, a foundation was made to Beechworth from Abbeyleigh. In the following year, Goresbridge sent a little band of missionary Sisters to open a foundation at Wangaratta. Two years after the Beechworth foundation, a second band of missionary Sisters left Abbeyleigh for Ararat at the request of the Right Reverend J. Moore, Bishop of Ballarat.

In 1889, all the Brigidine convents were amalgamated under a Mother-General, whose residence is at Tullow. Each Province has a Novitiate House under a Mother-Proprio. At the present time there are Brigidine convents—affiliations of the first foundations in the State of Victoria—at Rochester, Kyabram, Maryborough, Horsham, Mentone, Albert Park, Hawthorn, Springvale, Ardeer, Geelong and Traralgon. The head house in the Victorian Province, established in Malvern in 1917, is also the Novitiate House.

Cardinal Moran's Prayer to Saint Brigid

O Glorious Saint Brigid, Mother of the Churches of Erin, Patroness of our missionary race, wherever their lot may be cast, be thou our guide in the paths of virtue, protect us amid temptation, shield us from danger. Preserve to us the heritage of chastity and temperance; keep ever brightly burning on the altar of our hearts the sacred fire of Faith, Charity, and Hope, that, thus, we may emulate the ancient piety of Ireland's children, and the Church of Erin may shine with peerless glory as of old. Thou wert styled by our fathers "The Mary of Erin;" secure for us by thy prayers the all-powerful protection of the Blessed Virgin, that we may be numbered here among her most fervent clients, and may hereafter merit a place, together with thee and the countless Saints of Ireland, in the ranks of her triumphant children in Paradise. Amen.

Prayer to Saint Brigid

Dear Saint Brigid, brilliant star of sanctity in the early days of our Irish faith and love for the omnipotent God who has never forsaken us, we look up to you now in earnest, hopeful prayer. By your glorious sacrifice of earthly riches, joys, and affections, obtain for us grace to "seek first the Kingdom of God and His justice" with constant trust in His fatherly care. By your life of laborious charity to the poor, the sick, the many seekers for light and comfort, obtain for us grace to be God's helpers to the utmost of our power during our stay on earth, looking forward, as you did, to our life with Him during eternity.

By the sanctified peace of your deathbed, obtain for us that we may receive the fullness of pardon and peace when the hour comes that will summon us to the judgment seat of our just and most merciful Lord. Amen.

Nihil Obstat:

BERNARD O'CONNOR
Diocesan Censor

Imprimatur:

✠ DANIEL MANNIX
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis
18th October, 1960



This e-book was produced by:

The Seraphim Company, Inc.

8528 Kenosha Drive

Colorado Springs, CO 80908-5000

www.servi.org